

Elimination of School Fees and Parental Contributions in Tanzania: Implications on Parental and Community Commitment to Support Primary School Activities in Songea Municipality, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the impacts of eliminating school fees and parental contributions on parental and community participation in primary school activities. The study was guided by two research questions: (1) what is the impact of eliminating school fees and parental contributions in primary schools on parental and community participation in school related activities?(2) How do parents view their participation in primary school activities in the context of fee-free education? The study was mainly qualitative and employed a multiple holistic case study design. A total of 31 participants were involved. The participants included teachers, heads of schools, parents, and Ward Education Officer. Data were collected through interviews, FGDs, and documentary reviews. Themes and subthemes were inductively developed through thematic analysis. The study suggests that, due to poor perception of the policy, the implementation of FFEP resulted in a significant reduction of parental participation in school activities. Most parents thought that the government was responsible for everything. The study also found that parents had mixed feelings regarding their participation in primary school activities in the context of FFEP. However, most of them thought that FFEP had provided them with a room to escape from contributions and other school responsibilities. The study recommends that strategic measures should be taken to educate parents on FFEP. Also, the government should find a way to restrict too many contributions which may lead to parents' negative attitude towards FFEP. Likewise, there is a need to improve the existing policy so as to plug loop holes that discourage parental participation in school activities.

Keywords: Parental participation, community participation, school activities, fee-free education, school fees

INTRODUCTION

The campaigns to policies in favour of free education at global level are arguably spearheaded by the realization of user fees and other mandatory contributions as a pervasive obstacle to primary school enrolment and completion for millions of children (Kattan, 2006). For instance, in 2012, UNESCO (2015) indicated that 58 million children were out-of-school due to charges which were still prevalent in schools. Parents in Indonesia, China and many African countries cite user fees as a major obstacle to enrolling their children in schools (Kattan, 2006). Dropout rates were also high in schools and were caused by parents' non-payment of school fees for their children. In 32 countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, at least 20% of children enrolled in schools are not expected to reach the last grade (UNESCO, 2015).

In understanding that, Tanzania attempted to offer free education in 1963 (HakiElimu, 2017). The purpose was to reduce enrolment disparity between children from rich and poor households. In this respect, the government took the responsibility of financing education system; it provided fee-free primary education. The abolition of school fees (in Tanzania) for basic education was re-featured in 2002 as a response to problems of cost-sharing policy of 1995. During this time, the country implemented Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP). The PEDP had three phases – 2002-2006; 2007-2011; and 2012-2016 (Daven, 2008). PEDP aimed at improving primary education by ensuring that girls and boys from rich and poor families, and children with disabilities were not left out. The PEDP's goals were to improve quality and equity in primary education, improve retention in the seven years of primary education and build school capacity (Dennis & Stahley, 2012). This suggests that PEDP had an intention to reach all

children in the country so as to improve access to primary education. In order to ensure that no child is denied access to school, the government made primary education free; it abolished all school fees and compulsory cash contributions (Daven, 2008; Dennis & Stahley, 2012). It can be argued here that the abolition of school fees and all other mandatory contributions was a government's strategy to expand enrolment in primary education (Rajani & Omondi, 2003; Dennis & Stahley, 2012). Despite the fact that removing school fees reduces a significant burden on poor families, but it has also adverse effect on parents and community participation (Hakielimu, 2017). According to Kattan (2006) and World Bank and UNICEF (2009), a wide range of challenges within the context of abolishing school fees are evident. Kattan (2006) raises an argument that although the abolition of school fees has many promising outcomes, it has some challenges including the decrease of parental participation. Similarly, reporting the lessons of abolishing school fees in Africa, the World Bank and UNICEF (2009) mentioned the issues of parents and community participation as a major challenge that must be confronted with great urgency. This emphasis was among the reasons which encouraged the current researchers to conduct this study.

The Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

The theoretical perspectives of the current study are drawn from the Epstein's theory of "overlapping spheres" of influence related to parental involvement. The theory assumes that there are three major contexts in which students learn and grow (Epstein, 2009). These are the family, the school and community. These contexts/spheres may be drawn together or pushed apart (Epstein, 2009; Epstein et al., 2002). This suggests that there are some practices that schools, families and communities work separately and others they work jointly to influence children's learning and development. The theory assumes that family, school and community partnerships must be designed to

engage, guide, energize and motivate pupils to their own success. Parents, family and community form important elements of the three overlapping spheres. Thus, parent/community involvement and cooperation with the school is essential for effective functioning of the school. This study takes the view that the three spheres (family, school and community) work jointly. In this view, family, school and community work as partners. They recognize their shared interests in responsibilities for children and they work together to create better programmes and opportunities for pupils. Epstein's theory was found to be relevant to the current study because of its insistence on partnership between the three spheres/contexts which are significant for pupils' learning. It is this partnership that forms the area of interest of the current study – parents' participation.

Fee-free basic Education

As noted earlier, fee-free education has been considered as a tool to advance education to all citizens and minimize the number of out of school children, so as to balance the education differences between the haves and the have not (Uvambe, 2021). Studies suggest that majority of the European countries have been providing fee-free basic education for nearly 100 years or slightly longer. Bulgaria offers a good experience of European countries implementing fee-free basic education. Education in state owned schools is free of charge and it is compulsory until the age of 16 (UNESCO, 2010). In Asia, countries are catching up, and most of them offer fee-free basic education to the best of their ability. Taking China for example, great achievements are evident in universalizing compulsory education. Sub-Saharan Africa has benefited greatly from fee-free basic education. For example, in Ethiopia, the most readily available tool to promote enrolment is the removal of schooling fees (Chickoine, 2016). In Tanzania, the abolition of school fees and all other mandatory contributions is considered as a strategy to expand enrolment and improve completion rates in

primary education (Rajani & Omondi, 2003). Evidence suggests that, under PEDP scheme, enrolments in primary schools increased. In one year, after the implementation of PEDP, the enrolments raised by 43.3%, from 1,139,334 in 2001 to 1,632,141 in 2002 (Hakielimu, 2017). Similarly, Msoroka (2010) observed the same when he argued that the rate of enrolments in primary schools was increased following PEDP initiatives. However, some studies established that the strategies which were opted to enhance fee-free basic education such as Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP) did not show clearly how parents' participation in education activities were to be (Joseph, 2014).

Parental/Community Support to School Activities

Parental/community support to school activities involves parents/community interaction and participation with school and their children to promote academic success (Hill et al, 2004). Limited parental/community support to school activities has been considered part of the shortcomings of children's education (Nyembeke, 2016). Although lack of parental/community support to school activities may be contributed by many factors, existing empirical evidence links it with the abolition of school fees and other parental contributions (Kattan, 2006; World Bank & UNICEF, 2009). Kattan (2006) raised an argument that although the abolition of school fees has many promising outcomes, it has some challenges including the decrease of parental participation in school activities.

Methodology

This study examined the impacts of elimination of school fees and other parental contributions on parental and community participation in primary school activities. The study addressed the following research questions: What is the impact of eliminating school fees and parental contributions in primary schools on parental and community participation in school related activities? and how do parents view

their participation in primary school activities in the context of fee-free education? The study was guided by interpretivist research paradigm, which assumes that “reality is subjective and multiple, as seen by participants in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 17). With this understanding, this qualitative study investigated the impacts of elimination school fees on parental/community participation in school activities from multiple participants selected from three cases (schools). The three schools involved in this study were selected based on the performance on National Examinations in the previous year. The first school was from the best five performing schools; the second one was from the five poor performing schools, and the last one was from a middle group. A total of 31 participants were involved; they included 18 teachers (six from each school), one (1) ward education officer, three (3) heads of schools and nine (9) parents (three from each school).

Researchers were involved physically and mentally during individual and group interviews. In the process, meanings were made from the raw data collected based on the interpretations of participants’ words and feelings. This allowed the researchers to understand participants’ experiences on parental involvement on school activities in this era of fee-free education. The current study employed multiple holistic case study design. In this respect, relevant data from all three (selected) schools were treated as a whole (multiple holistic) (Msoroka, 2018; Yin, 2014). Data were collected through interviews, Focus Group Discussions and documentary reviews. The collected data were analysed using content analysis approach with the aid of Miles and Huberman’s framework for qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). With this framework, the following five stages of analysis were used: firstly, the researchers transcribed the voice recorded data. This was followed by translation stage. At this stage,

the verbatim in Kiswahili were translated into English language by researchers. Thereafter, the data reduction stage was followed. In this stage, the bulky data from the field were rechecked, sorted, and re-examined the verbatim transcriptions so as to reduce and compress them without losing the key messages. Then, the data display stage was followed. During this stage, the reduced/summarized data were organized into data display sheets with the most recurring or common themes being identified. Lastly, conclusions were drawn out of data patterns established with verifications made using secondary data from documents (Komba, 2010).

Discussion of the Findings

This section discusses the findings related to the impacts of eliminating schools fees and mandatory parental contributions on parental/community participation in public primary school related activities. For the purpose of clarity of discussion, the discussion is sectioned accordance to the major themes developed from the analysis.

Parents' Involvement in Decision-making Meetings

The findings suggest that parents' attendance in parents' meetings in the selected schools was poor. During interviews, one of the heads of schools revealed poor parents' participation in decisive platforms which provided direction for school management. He said:

We have a school committee here, but I can assure you it is not active as such. I have evidence that there are members who attend meetings rarely and those who have never attended. These are ones who when decisions are made, they go way round complaining about the decisions made by a few fellow representatives who attended the meeting. I remember one case at my school...parents decided that examination classes (standard IV and VII) be provided with food at school to help them stay long

at school in order to prepare themselves for national examinations. The decision to contribute was parents based but the implementation of the programme had been a slip. Some parents who contributed came one time at the school with sacks to collect their maize and beans contributed for their children...some even shouted that education was for free so no need to contribute anything!

One teacher commented:

Nowadays, participation has dwindled especially when compared to what it was some years back. Things have been worsened since the government declared fee-free primary education. Many parents do not participate in meetings saying that these are bygone practices; the government is doing everything for their children on their behalf.

Interview with parents showed similar pattern of responses to those of head school. One parent said:

I am a member of a school committee in our school... I am sorry to say that this is the third year since I was appointed to be a member of the committee... if I remember well, for the entire time; I have managed to attend only two meetings... I have been very busy with shamba work. After all, the fee-free policy has made us relax because the government is doing everything for us.

The issue of low parents' participation in meetings was also articulated by one parent in one of the selected schools. He said:

The participation of parents is very low as compared to past days. Nowadays, only a few of them show cooperation. I can give you one experience, we have a tendency to conduct parents' meetings to discuss important decisions that affect daily running of the

school, but only a few of us attend. Sometimes, in the parents' meetings, we agree to contribute workforce and money in support of school activities but the turn up is poor. Majority of the parents claim that they have been relieved by the government's decision to offer free education.

During an interview, the WEO commented:

When parents' meetings are called, parents do not turn-up. Sometimes a call may be made thrice, yet parents do not respond...only a few do attend.

Evidence from the selected schools indicates that parents' number in school meetings has never turned positive despite the importance of parents meetings. This finding contradicts the theory of overlapping spheres of influence (which guided this study). The theory insists on bringing together the three spheres – family, the school and community – for school prosperity (Epstein, 2009). However, it is clear in this study that, with fee-free policy, parents kept themselves away from schools' decision making organs (meetings). It is argued here that this finding concurs with the findings of Kimu (2012) who found that most teachers attributed the lack of parental involvement to parents themselves. Again, this finding is in connection with Action Aid (2010) which found that most parents, who were members of the school committees, did not know their role in school governance. Also, the finding is in line with those of Fitriah (2010) who found that the characteristics and the extent of parents' participation in school management have changed and decreased significantly as a result of a new Free School Programme (FSP) introduced by the government in 2009. For this reason, one would argue that parents in the selected schools (and those in other studies) were not aware of their

responsibilities in parents' committees or being members of parent-teacher associations.

Reasons for poor parents' involvement in decision-making meetings

As discussed in the previous section, parents' attendance to meetings in the selected schools was not satisfactory. This section discusses the reasons learnt from the field for parents' poor attendance to meetings. The findings suggest three reasons (3) for parents' poor involvement to meetings. They include poor understanding of fee-free education policy (FFEP), other socio-economic commitments, and avoiding contributions.

Poor understanding of fee-free Education Policy (FFEP)

In this study, several participants attributed poor parents' attendance to meetings with poor understanding of the FFEP itself. To them, FFEP refrained parents from school activities. One parent argued:

Most of us (parents) have not understood the fee free education policy. Some of us think that everything should be done by the government. Hence, it is time for parents to relax.

Similarly, another parent said:

When we were told that education is free, many of us understood that parents were no longer supposed to participate on issues concerning schools; it was parents' time to rest and concentrate on other businesses of life. If the government take over the responsibility, then what is our role in meetings?

In the same line, one head of the school commented:

When called in meetings, they raise the concern that they don't see the reason to attend because everything is carried out by the government...the government has banned all forms of parents' contributions in schools.

One parent commented:

What do parents need to do? We have been told it is free education...all contributions have been restricted. So, what are we going to do in meetings? We used to attend meetings because it was from meetings where contributions were initiated. Ever since we were told that education was free, I have never attended any parent meeting.

The findings of this study are close to Hakielimu (2017) which observed that some parents perceived fee free basic education to mean that they were no longer required to contribute or participate in any activity related to education of their children. This suggests a purely misunderstanding of the FFEP. Ideally, it was assumed that freeing parents from fees and other parental contributions would motivate and bring parents closer to school. This would be shown by parents engaging in various school activities such as participation in decision making meetings, support learning at home and volunteering to school activities/projects, but the study findings have suggested a different perspective. Hence, one would argue that poor understanding of the policy has by far jeopardized parents' engagement in these school practices.

Parents' Commitments to Other Socio-economic Issues

This study found that some parents did not attend school meetings because of the nature of their day to day life commitments. For instance, one parent at school C argued:

In my experience, sometimes when you attend meetings people talk a lot and consume much time. They don't consider our (personal) responsibilities.

You attend the meeting and the whole day goes by without doing any income earning activity. So, if you have other commitment you can't choose attending the meeting, you simply go to your work.

Similarly, another parent said:

You know, it is discouraging that you are called to the meeting and you find that you are alone at the meeting; people are busy with their daily activities. You know what, life is very challenging; if you don't go to work then hunger knocks at your door.

A teacher from school C said that *"many parents are peasants; they are busy with their farming and other earning activities"*.

Based on the findings of this study, one can argue that a few parents who managed to attend parents' meetings might have been those with good educational or economic background and were eager to help their children learn comfortably. For parents who did not care for their children, their attendance to parents' meetings was poor; they focused on other socio-economic commitments. Sheehey (2006) argues that most parents are unable to attend school meetings during the school day due to varying factors. He mentioned low income, parental depression, economic and educational differences between parents and their children's teachers as factors that hindered parents' attendance to school meetings. From this perspective, one can hold that the poor parents' attendance in the current study might also have been influenced by illiteracy or economic status of the families. This argument is consistent with Back (2010) who found that parental involvement practices differ based on parents' level of education in the sense that parents with more formal education are more active than less educated parents. Hence, it can be argued that parents with

low formal education are insecure about their knowledge regarding academic matters and thus this works as a barrier for their attendance to school meetings.

Avoiding contributions

This study found that avoiding contribution was another reason for poor attendance to school meetings. For instance, one parent from school 'A' held that

Some parents fear contributions. Whenever they are called to attend school meetings they think that they are going to be asked for new contributions.

Another parent added:

I wish the payment of school fees could continue. I am bored with today's contributions; they bring chaos to poor families. Look, the parents' meetings do not discuss other issues related to school; they have turned into sources of contributions. As a result, majority of the parents do not see the value of fee-free education.

The same argument was raised by a teacher of school 'B' during FGD.

She said:

In my view, I think parents dodge meetings simply because they know that parental meetings have turned into a platform for many contributions in schools. However, these parents fail to understand that contributing for school is one of the ways to get involved in school issues, bearing in mind that schools are community properties.

Another teacher argued:

FFEP has relieved parents of becoming hostages of school contributions including school fees. If you hold a meeting that reintroduces contributions do you think parents will be positive to that? They will avoid the kinds of such meetings.

Examining the data above, one would conclude that many parents were not happy with school contributions. So, any practice that reintroduces contributions was resisted. Arguably, this contributed to poor parents' attendance to school meetings. Ideally, one would think that the elimination of school fees and parental contributions would eventually raise commitment of parents to school activities, including attending meetings. Arguing from the findings of this study, it is clear that the tendency of asking parents to contribute for school activities in the meetings has demoralised parents from attending school meetings. According to Epstein's theory, parental involvement in school activities is expected to improve the partnerships between family, school, and the community. However, the current findings oppose such an assumption as parents' participation in school meetings in the current study was low. From this perspective, one would assume that there was poor partnership between the community and the selected schools as a result of fee-free education policy. Arguably, the parents in the current study perceived that fee-free basic education removed them from participation on any activity related to education of their children (Hakielimu, 2017).

Parents' support on Children's School Requirements

Taking care of one's children is one of the things that determine parents' involvement on school activities. Responsible parents usually ensure that their children are well equipped with school uniforms and all learning materials, including exercise books and textbooks. Also, responsible parents are concerned with discipline and attendance of

the child to school. They take measures in case they find that the child's behaviour does not support academic achievements. In this study, it was found that the elimination of school fees and other contributions in public primary schools lowered parenting spirit of parents. The findings show that some parents were totally turned into irresponsible parents as they did not supply necessary school needs to their children. During interviews, some heads of schools agreed that parenting behaviour of some parents was changed. Some students were not well supported as if they had no parents or guardians to take care of them. On this particular observation, one head of school commented:

In my view, fee-free education has lowered parents' spirit of caring for their children. Nowadays, children in our school are not supplied with the needed basic provisions such as uniforms, and exercise books. Can you imagine, we have children coming to school with civilian clothes! We communicated with their parents; they said that they thought everything was supplied by the school because the education is free, then everything ought to be free including wearing clothes of one's choice.

The head of school 'C' also said:

Parents' commitment to their children is very low...to me I can see that poor understanding of FFEP has brought all these troubles. Now, parents think that the task of taking care of children has turned out to be the government's responsibility.

Interview with parents provided similar results. Some parents complained about the behaviour of some of their fellow parents who seemed to be irresponsible since the implementation of fee-free

education policy in primary schools. One parent noted this with a concern:

Honestly, most of the parents have become irresponsible. How dare a child of your own goes to school without any learning materials? Some pupils have no uniforms. When we agreed to contribute for food, there was a great opposing force from parents who always claim that the government has stopped all sorts of parents' contributions. The government has taken the burden instead.

On the same regard, another parent said:

Only a few parents have contributed, but many have not. They don't bother their daughters and sons staying at school hungry. Their song is, 'it is free education', and the government has banned all parents' contributions at schools. They think it is their time to relax and enjoy.

Similarly, another parent from school 'B' argued:

We see some children going to school without school uniforms, exercise books and text books. We conclude that their parents do not care for them...these are actually irresponsible parents. How dare you just let your son or daughter go to school without any proper school uniforms? Has free education grabbed our role to support our own children? In my view, this is indeed a poor understanding of the policy. Some parents think that the government has taken our role of caring for our children. So, children will get everything from school; this is wrong.

The quoted findings above suggest that parents' parenting behaviour has fallen down. Consequently, school managements have been facing

challenges in their quest to provide quality education and school management. It should be noted that when teachers do not feel a parental support, they often believe that it is a waste of their time to contact parents (Uvambe, 2021). The findings from this study show the existing weaker forms of participation of parents in caring for and supporting their children. This does not support the theory which guided the current study. Family/community relationship could not reinforce the importance of the school that would be realised through helping and supporting their children. These findings are close to the findings of Hakielimu (2017) which hold that majority of the parents had heard about fee-free education on radio or through newspapers and they were unclear about what it meant and thought that they would not have to make any contribution for the education of their children. Mbawala (2017) found 67% of the parents who registered their students in schools did not involve themselves effectively in their children's academic activities such as guiding students in attempting home works, checking daily the student's work, tracking students attendance, volunteering in school activities and communicating with teachers and other personnel including heads of schools.

Parents' Support on Home Learning

Pupils' academic achievement is dependent on the efforts of the pupil on one hand and teachers' and parents' on the other hand. Usually, parents are expected to play a major role in supporting children's learning at home. Literature suggests that the effectiveness of children's learning at home depends on the engagement of parents, grandparents and overall family members within the home environment (Ingram et.al, 2007). Equally important, children with high academic support from parents have shown high academic performance. In this study, it is clear that FFEP affected parents' role

in supporting learning at home. For some parents, FFEP gave them the relief when it came to helping children at home. These parents believed that since education was completely free, parents were not supposed to do anything because the government had covered what they were supposed to do. This notion was evident in the interview with the WEO who commented:

I have evidence about some parents who say that they don't support their children's learning at home simply because they are not teachers. If they do the work of teachers, what will teachers do at school? The government is paying them to teach our children. Some go far thanking the FFEP for removing chaos and disturbances of school fees and contributions. They claim that the government is doing everything on their behalf and thus they have been relieved such that they have time to engage in other businesses.

Similar finding was pointed out by a head teacher of school C who said:

Many parents are standard seven leavers. Due to their low level of education, they don't support their children with their homework or supervise their studies at home...Once children are back from school they are given a number of activities to do. They claim that they have spent much time at school and when back home they must assist them in household chores.

Interview with parents showed that parents rarely supported their children's learning at home. One parent commented

"...most of we parents are not responsible...I wish we could continue paying school fees and all mandatory

contributions we could feel the pinch and thus we could support children both at home and school wholeheartedly.

However, there were some parents who held different views. They said that FFEP had relieved them such that they could now take time to support their children in all that could not be offered by the government. They said they had time to support children learning at home and provide them with necessary provisions such as buying the exercise books, school uniforms and supplying them with food. This is what one parent argued:

I am happy that the FFEP has relieved us from a heap of commitments. Look! I have time now to inspect my child's exercise books to check whether he writes all the notes and do the homework. Where necessary, I support him to do correctly his homework.

Similarly, another parent at school A argued:

At least I studied to form four secondary educations. When my son comes back from school I have a tendency of sitting with him trying to assist him academically. If he has questions on some subjects of interest, I support him. I feel rather good to see that he trusts me.

It is argued here that supporting children's learning at home is attributed to by many factors such as educational background and socio-economic status of the parents. This is why Hill and Taylor (2004) argued that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds faced many more barriers in their bid to involve their children in learning, including having nonflexible work schedules, lack of resources and stress due to residing in disadvantaged neighbourhood.

The findings by Mbawala (2017) affirms that many parents did not involve themselves effectively in their children's academic activities such as guiding them in attempting home works, checking their daily academic activities and tracking their attendance. It is argued here that lack of parents' involvement in school activities both at home and school is an increasing problem which leads to teachers' frustrations (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000).

Parents/Community Volunteering in School Development Activities

Parents' volunteering to school activities may include helping schools as volunteering teachers in case of shortage of teachers, fundraising or offering labour for construction projects (classrooms or toilets building) at the school (Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017). This study found low parents' volunteering spirit in schools' activities. While visiting schools, current researchers found some existing school projects initiated by parents many years ago, but were incomplete. In the interview with one of heads of schools he noted that parents' volunteering spirit had dwindled, in comparison to what it was in the past years (prior to FFEP). He commented:

The way I see, prior to FEP parents were taking schools as theirs...so volunteering for school activities was very high...Parents were volunteering in brick making, fetching water for school projects. Some parents volunteered to teach some subjects they were able to...During sports, parents volunteered to teach traditional ngoma and songs...They also offered labour power in construction of classrooms and toilets. However, since the implementation of FFEP the argument has been that the government has paid for the school to hire experts to undertake such activities...volunteering in schools is seen as a bygone practice. Nowadays, it's very rare to see parents

volunteering. If they do, they do it unwillingly fearing punishment from the local government. In fact, they don't do it willingly.

The heads of schools had similar observation. One of them commented:

Today, it is hard to see parents volunteering in school activities. Take an example, my school has inadequate toilets. In 2016, parents launched toilet construction project...as I speak now the project has not yet been completed; it has almost come to a complete stop. There is a lot of complaints from the construction committee that parents refused to contribute as they agreed.

One parent had a similar view. This is what she said:

I don't participate in all school activities. I just attend those activities which I can manage...we had a building that we were required to make bricks for ... I only attended twice...from there, I stopped because I was discouraged by poor attendance. Only a few parents attended in that brick making activity. I have a lot of commitments too.

Another parent said: "...

I have never volunteered in any school project despite the fact that my son studies here...I'm busy with shamba activities...the government has been doing all work for our children on our behalf.

The above findings relate to the findings of Mbawala (2017) and Gregory (2018) who found that the majority of parents who registered their children to schools did not effectively volunteer in school activities. Hence, the current researchers have the opinion that parents

need to be made aware that their voluntary and meaningful involvement is important as it plays a decisive role in developing their children's potential; they need to be guided to fulfil their role. The data collected from the documentary review also indicated low status of parents' participation in school activities. The reviewed documents included parents' *attendance register to voluntary activities, documents on existing voluntary projects, school committee reports, parents' meeting register book, parents' contributions record book, parents meetings minutes/reports, and academic progressive report*. Table 1 below summarizes the findings from the reviewed documents.

Table 1: Status of Parents' Participation from 2016 to 2020

SNO	Indicators of parents' participation	Status from 2016 to date		
		School A	School B	School C
1	Parents' attendance register to voluntary activities	4	Nil	2
2	Parents' meeting minutes	6 out of 20	3 out of 20	4 out of 20
3	Parental voluntary/support projects at school	2 classrooms, 10 pits toilet	4 classrooms	Desks contributions and 2 classrooms building
4	Presence of school committee	Available	Available	Available
5	Parents-teachers communication records	Nil	Nil	Nil

Source: Field data

From Table 1, it is clear that parental participation in school activities varied substantially from activity to activity. Participation was relatively high in parents’ voluntary activities that involved building of classrooms and toilets when compared to other activities. In general, the attendances of parents in school activities were relatively low and varied considerably. It can be argued that the attendance, therefore, affected in one way or another parents’ engagement in school activities.

Parents’ Perceptions on FFEP

Parent’s views on their participation in school activities within fee-free basic education context, was one of the issues captured by this study. The assumption behind was that understanding parents’ views was vital so as to gauge their understanding of fee-free education policy. Data related to this aspect were captured using interviews. The findings showed mixed perceptions of parents with regard to fee-free education policy in relation to their participation in school activities. The major perceptions are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Parents/Community’s Perceptions of FFEP

Policy Statement	Parents/community perception
The Government shall ensure a free basic education in public system.	FFE policy as a kind of freedom from operational costs
	Shift of roles and responsibilities from parents to the government – community acts as mere beneficiaries in the new realm of relationship
	Increase of family expenditure on education for the poor

Source: Field Data

This study suggests that the parents had three different views on FFEP. For some, FFEP has relieved parents from the burden of mandatory contributions; parents become free from school operational costs. On this aspect, for instance, one parent said:

I am very grateful to the current government. It cares for us (poor families). Paying school fees was a heavy burden for us.... Now things are okay; there is absolutely nothing to worry about. No school fees, no contributions for security, water, desks. All of these have been banned. I am very happy.

This view could arguably be contributed due to the fact that parents were relieved from responsibilities of paying school fees and other mandatory contributions. Other parents had the opinion that fee-free education policy shifted roles and responsibilities from them (parents) to the government. On this aspect, one parent noted:

I'm very happy with the FFEP. This policy has relieved us (poor parents) from a multiplicity of commitments, including paying school fees and other mandatory contributions. I can see that the government decided to carry the parents' load. The role of financing the education for our children has shifted to the government. Now, the government has been supplying to school all what students need in schools, including capitation grants, supply of books, building of school infrastructure and other facilities.

This perception could arguably be tied to the fact that prior to the FFEP, parents used to pay school fees and other mandatory contributions. This brought them close to school issues. Currently, they feel a gap between them and schools. Some of the parents viewed

FFEP as a policy which increased expenditure for the poor. In some schools, parents (themselves) discussed and introduced contribution such as food programme for students, evening classes, security, and classroom construction. With these non-mandatory contributions, some parents found themselves. They felt that these contributions added up to the costs of uniforms and exercise books incurred by parents. On this aspect, some parents commented:

Although the FFEP has freed us from school fees and other mandatory contributions, the policy has somehow increased the burden to (us) parents. As a parent of two children studying in this school, I have been vulnerable to unplanned contributions. They just come up from parents' meetings for the name of school activities and projects. I note similar complaints from fellow parents. We feel that the FFEP has added costs of education in a different way. It is better to pay school fees. Take an example; we are needed to pay a lot of contributions initiated by parents' meetings or school committees. We are told to contribute for school feeding programme, utilities, graduations and constructions of classrooms and toilets.

Another parent noted:

In my view, despite the presence of FFEP, education has never been free as many people think. There is still a range of other emerging contributions that cumulatively have added to education expenses that (we) parents have now been charged.

With such parents' perceptions (relieved from the burden of mandatory contributions, shift of roles and responsibilities from

parents to the government and Increase of family expenditure on education), two conclusions can be arrived. One, it could be argued that parents had poor understanding of the FFEP. Believing that they were relieved from the burden and the shift of roles and responsibility are arguably connected to poor understanding of the policy (Uvambe, 2021). This is due to the reason that parents cannot be relieved by anyone their responsibilities as parents. FFEP does not cover direct costs such as child feeding and school uniform. Second, the capitation grant provided by the government is not sufficient to cover school needs (Uvambe, 2021). Consequently, schools (through parents' meetings) have to seek other ways to funds their activities; there comes non-mandatory contribution. The non-mandatory contributions somehow distort the meaning of FFEP and raise parents' complaints. Thus, it is recommended that government should ensure that enough funds is allocated for capitation grant, and they should be disbursed on time.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study addressed two research questions: What is the impact of eliminating school fees and parental contributions in primary schools on parental and community participation in school related activities? and How do parents view their participation in primary school activities in the context of fee-free education? As mentioned earlier, the first research question of this study investigated the impacts of eliminating school fees and parental contributions in primary schools on parental and community participation in school related activities. On this aspect, the study concludes that the implementation of FFEP resulted in a significant reduction of parental participation in school activities.

This study holds that the reduction of parental involvement in school activities has been influenced by poor perceptions of parents towards a newly established fee-free education policy in the country. Most parents thought that the government was responsible for everything. The second research question explored the parents' views on their participation in primary school activities in the context of fee-free education. On this aspect, the study concludes that parents had mixed feelings regarding their participation in primary school activities in the context of FFEP. However, most of them thought that FFEP had provided them with a room to escape from contributions and other school responsibilities. Hence, calling them to volunteer in anything was regarded as increasing the burden to parents, especially for poor households. As a result, such kind of parents did not involve themselves in anything related to school development and their children learning. Based on the arguments developed in this article, it is recommended that strategic measures should be taken to educate the public (parents) on FFEP with their respective roles and responsibilities. The government should find a way to restrict too many contributions which may lead to parents' negative attitude towards FFEP. Also, there is a need to improve the existing policy in order to plug loop holes that discourage parental participation in school activities; a model of parental participation in schools activities within the context of FFEP need be established. Other studies need to be conducted to establish an engaging model which can motivate and attract parents' participation in issues related to schools.

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